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WHY CITIES ARE BADLY GOVERNED.

BY THE HON. J. SLOAT FASSETT, OF THE NEW YORK SENATE.

ONE of the most serious, and therefore one of the most interesting, political problems of the day is the problem of the successful administration of municipal affairs. The unmistakable tendency of our people to congregate in large towns and cities, and the marked increase of a civic as against a rustic population, accentuate the importance of the question. With due reservations, it may be safely asserted, in a broad way, that up to this time in this country our municipal governments have been and are failures. Not absolute failures, to be sure, for many of the objects for which governments exist are in a way attained : great public works are constructed ; great public institutions maintained ; great public enterprises undertaken ; many crimes are punished and some prevented ; disorderly and dangerous classes are generally kept within reasonable limits ; sanitary measures are fairly well enforced ; and men and women may venture from their homes after nightfall without being certain of assault or molestation.

But all these things, together with the thousand and one other things that go to make up all there is of the conduct and control of a city, are accomplished at such an enormous expense, and are accompanied with so much of waste and extravagance, of robbery and scandal ; it costs so much to secure so little ; the results are so entirely incommensurate with the force expended, especially in our larger cities, and in comparison with our other divisional administrations,—that it is not unfair to say, bluntly, that our city governments are failures.

Our town and county affairs are generally handled with a careful economy that amounts at times to parsimony. Our State governments are usually administered with excellent economy.

In the administration of our national affairs our experience has been, in the one question of economy at least, highly satisfactory. For it is true—at least true enough to be stated as a general proposition—that each decade has witnessed a diminished waste in the collection and expenditure of each one thousand dollars of revenue, and this, too, while we have been rapidly increasing in population and wealth.

But our experiment in self-government in all our large cities presents quite a different picture. Why this difference? The people are the same. They read the same newspapers and periodicals. Their general intelligence and morality are the same. The amount of time which they devote to political questions is the same. Why are the results of their political efforts so widely different? Why are nation and State, which are relatively remote, better governed than cities, which are our immediate homes? It is suggested that the large affairs of the State and nation appeal more forcibly to men's imagination along the lines of patriotism and tradition, and hence with the same effort a more lively interest is created in them; and that, on the principle that the less is always subordinated to the greater, local elections and local tickets and local interests are either lost sight of entirely, or traded and slaughtered in an absorbing zeal for the wider issues.

There is undoubtedly some truth in this suggestion. Our people are divided into two great parties, primarily on lines growing out of differences of opinion on wide-reaching national questions, such, for instance, as the tariff; and, secondly, on lines growing out of State issues, such as high or low license or ballot reform. Because a man belongs to a given political party on account of his convictions on the question of the tariff, or of excise, or of ballot reform, it does not follow that he should, in a city election, where those issues have no bearing, vote for the candidate of the party whose national platform he indorses, rather than for the man whose success will be most sure to lead to a proper administration of the business affairs of the community. In other words, while the terms "Republican" and "Democrat" have great significance in national politics, and properly so, they should have no such significance as differentiating terms in municipal elections. This line of argument points directly to a popular remedy for civic evils—to wit, the absolute separation of local from general elections; an object which is to be attained in one of

two ways : either by having spring and fall elections, or by having general and local elections in alternate years.

Again, fault is found with the usual framework of government, which is substantially the same in all our cities—viz., a mayor elected at large, several executive or administrative boards or departments, either nominated by the mayor or by the mayor and common council, and a council of aldermen elected by wards. These officers are chosen on the majority plan. Many propositions are advanced looking to more or less radical changes in this general scheme, out of which it is expected great benefits will flow.

One suggestion is that all officers elected by the people should be elected in a manner to provide for minority representation, and that there should also be minority representation in all executive and administrative departments. This is founded on the belief that such a change would introduce an element of healthful opposition and aggressive criticism that would act as a wholesome preventive of present evils. Opposed to this is the theory that utterly repudiates divided responsibility, and wants all power to be yoked with complete responsibility. This theory embraces also most strenuous objection to the present persistent interference in the affairs of cities by State legislatures, and insists that most local corruption springs from such interference, because of the habit of dependence upon others which such interference superinduces. This theory culminates in the doctrine of absolute home rule, and embraces the idea that, corrupt as most of our large city governments are generally admitted to be, they would ultimately, if confined exclusively to their own resources, work out their own salvation. This doctrine of home rule almost necessarily includes reprehension of charter-tinkering and proposals for its prevention, some of which proposals may be thus briefly summarized :

First—There ought to be imbedded in the organic law itself a series of articles as general charters for cities of different grades, assuming, of course, that such provisions could be framed broad enough to cover all cases, and at the same time plastic enough to meet all emergencies.

Second—Such general charters for cities of different grades should be enacted in the form of general statutes, to be amended only by a very heavy majority of the legislative houses.

Another suggestion attributes all local troubles to the tempta-

tions offered by our present system of voting to an unscrupulous use of power, patronage, and money, and pleads for a new form of ballot.

Very likely not one of the foregoing suggestions or theories has within its scope the whole truth. It may be doubted if all combined explain much more than the superficial difficulties. Of course methods which are intrinsically bad or false of necessity lead to false and bad results. But, on the other hand, the very best of methods, if badly administered, will hardly prove more satisfactory. Is not the radical difficulty, after all, general apathy and practical indifference to and ignorance of all the administrative affairs of cities? If so, how shall the public be aroused? How shall active interest and intelligent interference be made to replace torpid inertia?

Bad government in cities consists generally in wrong uses of money and shows itself in the expense account. The usual motive for faulty administration in city affairs is plunder of the city's moneys. But suppose it is shown that the monetary arrangements in certain cities are so complicated that only a few men understand them, and none but experienced men can hope to successfully master their details. Men usually take no interest in what they do not understand, and are unwilling to devote very much effort to understand what, for the time being, appears remote from their own personal interests. So that where you have a maximum of complication in the fiscal affairs of any given city, you are sure to have the minimum of public interest in the same, as well as the minimum of probability of the summary detection and punishment of improper administration. Is not the first reform to be desired one of book-keeping? Is not the trouble in the counting-room rather than at the counter? If mischief grows out of apathy, and apathy out of ignorance, and ignorance out of confusion, is it not manifest that simplification is the first reform?

There are thirty-two chartered cities in the State of New York, ranging in population from eight thousand to a million and a half. There are no two of them whose charters are alike. There are no two of them that have the same methods of book-keeping. There are no two of them that pursue precisely the same course in the assessment and valuation of property for the purpose of taxation. And if there are any of them that pursue the same policy with

reference to the ownership of plants for furnishing their people with light, with water, with pavements, with sewers, it is entirely from accident, rather than from design. Nor do any charters direct how the city accounts are to be kept. As a matter of fact, the Legislature has not and never has had anything that could be called a policy in regard to the charters which it has granted to the various municipalities of the State. None of the cities of the State are under any obligation to report their financial condition to any central State authority, so that there is no place to which an inquirer may resort to obtain thorough-going, reliable information with reference to the receipts and expenditures of any of the cities of the State.

The more carefully one considers the figures which are available with reference to the cost of municipal government in this and other States, the greater one's curiosity becomes to know why it costs so much more in one locality than in another; why the economic equation in the administration of the affairs of cities with the same population, and the same relative extent of territory, and the same wealth, should not be identical. There being all the differences which have been set out above in the methods of administration, it will be seen at once that there is almost no basis for a scientific comparison upon which to base remedial legislation.

It was in the hope that some good work could be done toward bringing order out of chaos, and regularity out of confusion, and simplicity out of intricacy, that there was introduced in the Senate of this State on January 20, 1890, a resolution which, among other things, directed the standing Committee on Cities to undertake and prosecute, during the term of the present Senate, a general inquiry concerning the government of cities, as well as concerning the condition of the laws relating thereto and the actual methods and conditions of administration of any city or any department or bureau of any city in the State of New York, with power, of itself or by any sub-committee which it might appoint, to summon witnesses and to examine them under oath, send for books and papers, and hold meetings at such times and places as to such committee might seem requisite and proper. The committee was also authorized to employ counsel and such accountants, auditors, and assistants as it might deem requisite to a thorough prosecution of the inquest provided for.

The first work of the committee was to bring together all the general acts relating to the government of cities from each of the States of the Union, and to collate all the different provisions of the constitutions of the several States bearing upon the question of municipal government. The next labor undertaken by the committee was the collation of the various acts affecting the government of cities which have been passed by the Legislature of the State of New York during the years 1880 to 1889 inclusive. The result of this digest is somewhat startling, for it shows that in these ten years, exclusive of enabling acts, no less than 1,284 different laws have been enacted, changing or amending the charters of thirty cities of this State. New York city leads the van with 390 amendments. Brooklyn follows next with 195. Then comes Buffalo with 146. Middletown closes the procession with only one. These figures illustrate (and this is the first time they have ever been published) the enormous amount of local charter-tinkering that the Legislature is called upon to undertake from year to year; and it is only fair to estimate that very many of the amendments proposed perish between the time of introduction and the adjournment of the Legislature.

The next business of the committee was to send to the mayor of each of the cities of the State a letter accompanied by a list of forty-four interrogatories, which were confined to questions touching the general framework of the city government, the method of raising revenues, and the management and control and the expenditure of them. These interrogatories, however, were not sent to the mayor of the city of New York, for the reason that that city differs so widely in many important particulars from all other cities in the State. The committee determined to prosecute a special inquiry into the administration of the governmental affairs of the city of New York. What the committee has thus far done in New York is too recent to require statement here. The city and county being coterminous, the investigation was begun by an examination into the affairs of the sheriff's office, as the result of which there are pending at Albany proposals looking toward the abolition of imprisonment for debt and a complete remodelling of the sheriff's office. It is too early to predict all the changes which may result from the committee's work, but it purposes, among other things, to make a close examination into

the entire fiscal system of the city, with a view to unifying and simplifying the methods of accounts.

It is also the hope of the committee that, as a result of its labors generally, there may be placed upon our statute-books provisions for uniform charters for cities of a similar grade. Possibly, if such a course seems feasible, an amendment to the Constitution to the same effect will be proposed; also, propositions for legislation which shall result in the unifying and simplifying of methods of administration and of accounts in the various cities of the State, as well as legislation which shall require annual reports from the fiscal officers of the different cities to be made to the State comptroller or some other State officer.

So far as I am aware, this is the first effort which has been made by any State legislature to investigate with systematic thoroughness all of the conditions of municipal administration, looking not only to the formulation of general charters, as has been done in other States, but going further, and compelling a uniform system of administration and accounting. Whatever the result of the inquiry may be, it is the purpose of the Senate Committee, so far as lies in its power, to make its work a thorough and serious contribution toward the solution of the most difficult administrative and economic problem which confronts our country.

J. S. FASSETT.